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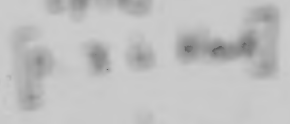

D. Lasaboy E-8 (ca. 1923-1932) 1932
P.L.O. Kikuyu P.L.O.

PREFACE

Some years ago I finished a very detailed study of the customs of the Kikuyu tribe, a book which, when published, will run to some 1,400 pages of print. It was my earnest hope that the publication of that book would help to make the European of Kenya understand a little more about the Kikuyu people and so avoid the many mistakes which, so often, cause misunderstanding and enmity between the two groups.

But publication was delayed, and is delayed, and now the misunderstandings on the part of the Europeans and the distrust on the part of the Kikuyu have reached a point where evil people have been able to bring into existence the present Mau Mau troubles, which I feel sure could have been avoided and need never have happened.

I have written the smaller book in the hope that a brief summary of some of the more important Kikuyu customs, and a discussion of how these have broken under the impact of European civilization in the short space of fifty years, may help to make the British understand two things: why and how the Mau Mau has come into being, and also how, when it has been suppressed, things can be improved so that such a state of affairs need never again disturb the peace of the land I love so much — Kenya. As I am better known for my work on the Psychology of East African Man as a student of social problems, I feel I must briefly state why I have felt qualified to write the book.

I was born and bred among the Kikuyu people, where my [illegible] parents, who were C.M.S. missionaries, lived and worked for so long. I speak the Kikuyu language as well as, if not better than, English. I spent most of my youth with the Kikuyu, I am a member of the Kikuyu age-group called

English economics is allowed to work on the commerce and banking of the City of London, and the French jurists have given us excellent analyses of the Code Napoléon.

Yet when an African writes a book about his own tribe, it seems almost necessary to justify his claims. I shall not make any such attempt on genuine humans, in my opinion, the book speaks for itself. Mr. Kenyatta also does not argue the point whether "Anthropology begins at home" is as true of Africa as of Europe. It obviously is. Mr. Kenyatta has acted upon the principle and produced an excellent monograph on African life and custom.

As every good ethnographer ought to do, the Author gives his credentials in his Preface. He has gone through the African course of training. He became, later on, practically acquainted with administrative and economic issues of East African policy. As to his training in Anthropology, I can add one or two points which he himself is not in a position to make. For several years past Mr. Kenyatta has been a member of my discussion class at the London School of Economics. He has thus associated in research and discussion, in original contribution and exemplary critical activity with a number of brilliant, experienced and highly competent young scholars, many of whom had done their own term of field-work, and all of whom had had years of previous academic training. In this group he was able to play an active, indeed creative part, giving an illuminating analysis, inspired by his inside knowledge of an African, but formulated with the full competence of a trained Western scholar. The present book bears full witness of his ability to construct, and his clarity of thought and expression.

There is one quality in the book to which I would like to draw special attention. Mr. Kenyatta is outspoken and

4. Kenyatta J-S (no date) 1953
FL10 Kikuyu FL10

known to an extent rarely found in students of social science: he recognizes the dangers of his own bias. "In the present work I have tried my best to record facts as I know them, mainly through a lifetime of personal experience, and have kept under very considerable restraint the sense of political grievances which no progressive African can fail to experience" (Preface). In fairness to Mr. Kenyatta, and as a matter of wisdom in any co-operation between Europeans of goodwill and Africans who have suffered the injury of higher education, we have to recognize the fact that an African who looks at things from the tribal point of view and at the same time from that of Western civilization, experiences the tragedy of the modern world in an especially acute manner.

For, to quote William James, "Progress is a terrible thing." It is terrible to those of us who half a century ago were born into a world of peace and order; who cherished legitimate hopes of stability and gradual development; and who now have to live through the dishonesty and immorality of the very historical happenings. I refer to the events of the last few years which seem to demonstrate once more that Might is Right; that bluff, impudence, and aggression succeed where a decent readiness to co-operate has failed. The first seeds of this new historical demoralization, let us remember, were indeed planted, not by Fascism or Communism, but by the frauds, the infamies, and the impotence of democratic statesmanship, which led us into the World War; then into the ensuing injustices and betrayals of the Peace Treaties. German National Socialism and the other totalitarianisms have been largely manufactured and fostered through the ill-applied brutality, then the weakness, of the Allied policies.

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Facing Mount Kenya

The cultural and historical traditions of the Gikuyu people have been verbally handed down from generation to generation. As a Gikuyu myself, I have carried them in my head for many years, since people who have no written records to rely on learn to make a retentive memory do the work of libraries. Without note-book or diary to jot down memoranda, the African learns to make an impression on his own mind which he can recall whenever it is wanted. Throughout his life he has much to commit to memory, and the vivid way in which stories are told to him and their incidents acted out before his eyes helps the child to form an indelible mental picture from his early teaching. In every stage of life there are various competitions arranged for the members of the several age-groups, to see their ability to recall and relate in song and dance the stories and events which have been told to them, and at such functions parents and the general public form an audience to judge and review the competitors.

Like any other Gikuyu child, therefore, I acquired in my youth my country's equivalent of a liberal education, but while I lived among my kinsfolk there was no obvious necessity for writing it down. But during my anthropological studies and visits to various countries in Europe, I had the opportunity of meeting men and women who were keenly interested in hearing about African ways of life. I then realized the necessity to set down in black and white the knowledge which had hitherto remained in my head, for the benefit both of Europeans and of those Africans who have been detached from their tribal life. Before setting to work I realized the difficulty which faced me owing to my lack of training in comparative social anthropology, and accordingly set about finding ways and means to acquire the necessary technical knowledge for recording

6. THE RIBUWA

[6] From the two sources available (Lambert Kenyatta Cannon, Nomad Divine and Sullivan's model we have been unable to get the standard pattern of the ceremonies sufficiently clear. Thanks to the information supplied by P. Kenyatta, however, I believe I have succeeded in finding the real structural arrangement. Most of the factual material on the other hand is from the authors mentioned above[1]).

[7a] The forth eighth and ninth logical sequence of the Cycle is not to be found amongst the K-i-o-o-o. There is contrast to the foregoing rites there are amongst the K-i-o-o-o more concepts to be kept apart. Four have not an clear grade but besides there is the initial half, and what is called the circumcision guild, both elements in the final division of the rites.

[7b] [8] I will now edit an analysis of the annual sex called age groups by Kenyatta.

Ideally there is one circumcision ceremony for males and females every year, but sometimes there is a lapse of one possibly of two years, which during reporters runs or lessons[2]). The rest of all bodies of young men (I do not intend to deal with female circumcision, which is circumcised together in the second division simultaneously) have an annual age-set, and receive a name in most cases identical all over the country[3]). When I am speaking of age the always refer to the annual circumcision group, which has a specific name usually referring to some important event occurring in the months preceding circumcision. It can be mentioned that the annual set is in all probability to be compared with the K-i-g-e-i-g-i subset. In native terminology, as in often when

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1) Since writing this the excellent study of Leakey, 1952 has come from the press.

2) Cf. also Cagnolo p. 106, cf. also the list at Tree.

3) The process according to which conformity in name is reached throughout the tribal area is explained by the Fathers to Gulliver (1951, p. 102, f).

morning, and that they must not allow themselves the weakness and pay a heavy fine in cattle or money next. A fine was dealt for complainers, and the futility of resistance to the power of "the Government" was clearly pointed out to them, and they were told to go home and think it well over.

Failing compliance in such a case, some five hundred of the Bhaca who, the hereditary enemies of the Abakwa, would then be summoned, and with the addition of some regular native troops and police the country would be covered. The men were killed, and the women, children, and herds taken captive until such time as, experience having been dearly bought, another meeting proved the requisite submission. The indemnity exacted from the natives usually consisted in part of the making of roads, the last object of the Government in a newly acquired territory being to make it accessible, so that troops may be readily moved backwards and forwards through it for the purpose of preserving order. Such a road consists of a track about twelve feet wide, from which the smooth grass has been cut away. The Abakwa share with the majority of native races an intense dislike to the making of a road, being shrewd enough to see all that its presence conveys, and never themselves make a visible track if it can be avoided. They are, however, very expert at the making a path, one man seizing the tussock by its top, whilst another chops the roots with the tip of his sword. The cleared track was carried as far as feasible along high ground, as the possibility of a native rising at any time was not forgotten.

As part of the work of thus bringing the country under control, a new station was formed at Ky-ar-i, some thirty miles to the northward of Fort Hall. I was present at the selection of the site, and obtained and surrounded a small plot of ground in the neighbourhood. The buildings I put up were a rough store room for photographic work, and what are known as kandas, large enclosed, mushroom huts, with thatched roofs

41 WITH A PRESIDENTIAL PROFILE

and open wide, unforeseen vistas were to present and guide myself.

As I looked northward from my door there was nothing but wilderness between me and Abyssinia. Lions were not infrequent visitors and distances shrunken. I was assured by so many as thirty as having been killed, to my own knowledge, within a radius of a mile of a point over my head today.

Living this little homestead as a depot, and availing myself of Mr. Rhodes's permission and advice, I travelled about the country shooting, photographing, collecting and taking notes, and not only were we on very amicable terms with the natives, but, on the contrary, became great friends with various influential men over a wide extent of country. In particular, the younger and only brother of one of the principal chiefs became my inseparable companion. He was an especially bright, attractive lad of about seventeen, widely known and universally popular, and by him I was introduced to Kikuyu society. When he would not introduce me himself as to the case of certain rites, his influence was such that I always found myself connected to the case of an influential spouse.

Much information regarding native customs was gathered from my various visitors during long rides and shooting expeditions about the country, when the conversation naturally turned on the objects around us, but the most fruitful source was in the evening, when I made it a practice to have a big fire in front of my tent and every one was welcome. They sat around it in order of social consideration, talking amongst themselves. I presently joined in the conversation, perhaps asking a question, and so induced one man to give an explanation which would be corrected and amplified by the others. In this manner I also got in touch with local gossip, and learnt what was going on in the neighbourhood—festivals, dances, markets, and the like. Invitations would be

given and repetitions made to be correct, and time to look over what I had done and correct me.

Going to England for a while in 1894, I again returned, this time with a wife, and on presenting my native friends to her she found them so interesting that she devoted herself to gathering information in directions that I had passed over, for doing which she was particularly favourably placed. Hence the following pages may be taken as dealing with matters carefully collected and noted with a special view to accuracy. They record over a period of more than five and a half years in all, between two and three of which were spent in intimate touch with the Akikúyu.

The methods of collecting information were much the same during the later visit as those already described, but it was in addition possible for my wife to visit among the huts and thus come in touch with the women and domestic life.

The language employed was Swahili. This is, as is well known, the tongue of the Swahili people, a coast race springing from the union of Arabs and native tribes. It has been carried by them into the interior on their trading and slave-raiding expeditions, and forms the lingua franca of this part of Africa. We each found, soon after arrival, that although our own knowledge of it made no pretence of being grammatical, there was with ours no barrier to communication with the natives, more especially in the case of those with whom we were in daily intercourse. Our upper servants were Swahilis, but they had in many cases been much with the Akikúyu, and spoke their language. A few of the younger Akikúyu have picked up Swahili, and whenever we found such an one, he was immediately engaged for some small office, such as carrying a camera or rifle, which made him one of our regular retinue, and brought him into constant touch with ourselves. Thus, though frequently each party was speaking

with the "sit at home at ease," that for the quiet work of the science the authorities, as well as the students, are human, and must be taken in their own time and way. An opportunity missed, because the student is tired or out of humour, will not occur again. On the other hand, the inquiry often has to be dropped when it is most interesting and productive, because the informant is becoming bored, and childlike needs a change of occupation. The books cannot be taken out of the shelves and returned to them at will.

These pages make no pretence of being an exhaustive treatise on the Akikuyu. The subject of the language has been adequately dealt with by Mr. McGregor in his Dictionary and Grammar, and only a few unusual and technical words are here given. No detailed study has been attempted with regard to the physical characteristics of the people. Their origin and clan organisation have been but lightly touched upon, and remarks on these matters must be regarded as tentative. Arrangements had been made for further research, but other work arose towards the end of our sojourn in Africa, and they had, to our very keen regret, to be abandoned.

While all pains have been taken that such information as has been given shall be accurate, it is obvious that its reliability must vary. The value of the evidence has, as far as possible, been made clear in the text. There are some matters on which it is possible to speak from our own definite knowledge and observation, such as handicrafts, certain religious ceremonies, and events of a like nature. In other cases, as for example various social customs, the evidence is of such a nature that its general correctness may, we think, be relied on. In addition, statements are also included which are believed at least to contain truth, and which it would have been a misfortune to leave unrecorded, but which in the time at our disposal it was impossible altogether to verify. The very obviousness of these and other deficiencies

PREFACE

was to proceed on the same lines in dealing with the matter collected. All attempts to books on the subject was therefore definitely avoided until these notes had been cast in their final form. They have therefore, at least, the advantage that they are a record of independent observation and unbiased by the theories of others.

With two diverse objects in view, the popular and scientific, a certain difficulty has arisen in the preparation of the pages which follow. The general reader naturally desires what may be termed an "impressionist" view of native life. The scientist, in his attempt at least, demands for as numerous and accurate details as possible, whether their immediate relevance to any point at issue is or is not obvious.

An attempt to solve the problem by relegating lengthy detail to the Appendix has not proved feasible. It is therefore necessary to rely, not without considerable confidence, on the discerning power of the reader to skip those parts which to him personally are not of interest. From this aspect a certain amount of repetition, which occurred in the original essays, has been allowed to remain, in order that each subject may be comprehensible on its own account.

In dealing with nomenclature, an English word has always been preferred to a Kikuyu, where the meaning is identical. Where the Kikuyu and English terms represent in the main the same idea, but with a certain difference of meaning, such as N'gai and God, N'gi-ma and Spirit, the two are employed interchangeably. The use of the Kikuyu word alone is in such cases apt to be confusing to all but the most conversant reader, while that of the English term itself is somewhat misleading.

Swahili words have been employed in only a very few instances, where, as explained elsewhere, they have passed into common use amongst Europeans.

In the family of languages words are inflected at the beginning and not at the end, thus, N'ko-ko-ya (singular) means k-ko-ko-ya (plural).

In all native words and names the Congregational System of spelling has been followed: in this the consonants are sounded as in English, and the vowels as in Italian. No hard and fast rule has been followed in the form of presentation of words: it has been thought that the interests of the reader will be usually best consulted by dividing them into their component syllables and noting the accentuation; but this practice has been abandoned when a word very frequently occurs, and its constant repetition in this manner might seem unnecessary and pedantic.

With regard to the responsibility for the collection of material, speaking generally, my husband's observations were those which dealt with dress, ornaments, and the arts and crafts of life, that is, the greater portion of Part I.; my own, those appertaining to the women, and to social and political life contained in Part II. On the difficult subject of religion, Part III., we each made notes or recorded conversations as occasion favoured. The folk tales were obtained by me in the time left at my disposal during his shooting or other expeditions.

It is obvious that there are certain drawbacks, from the reader's point of view, associated with this dual authorship, and the consequent change of personality in the writers, especially in Part III. These it has been sought to reduce as far as possible, but in certain cases it is, as will be seen, impossible to dissociate the description of events witnessed, or the account of a conversation held, from the individuality of the recorder.

It is to be hoped that there may also be corresponding advantages derived from the impressions of two observers approaching similar topics from the different aspects in which